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The Daily Press

HONGKONG, JULY 11TH, 1871.

The present condition of Chinese civilization affords abundant proof of its antiquity, and as this evidence, unlike that of ancient records, is an open book to every resident in China, it ought to be in a corresponding degree more forcible than the evidence gathered at second-hand from the classical literature of the country. The striking and melancholy feature in the existing condition of Chinese life is to be found in its predominant characteristic of distrust. This is to be observed equally in the lives of the people, and in most of their institutions and customs. Artificial as the laws and usages of European Society may be, there cannot be charged against it so complete a departure from simplicity pervading the daily life of all classes as is only too apparent in China. The masses live a grand falsehood from day to day: the educated classes prove their superior culture by complicating and interweaving falsehoods in a judicious manner. That is all the difference. Of verbal truth there is none to be relied on. Indeed, even where there is honesty of purpose the customary distrust seems to be the only possible mode of expressing it. It is no exaggeration to say that a Chinaman always has a fixed lie which to tell the truth.

The departure from original simplicity—there was simplicity, we suppose, at some time in China—equally marked in public institutions. What is called a spade was probably a spade once, but it has changed its form into something more nearly resembling a sword. What were these formidable institutions known as guilds or trade unions, which cause so great anxiety to the officials all over the country? Their very constitution shows that they were originally intended as combinations for the protection of a particular craft. Probably many ages ago, as the nation emerged from primitive barbarism, and began to learn political economy, long before such a science was dreamed of in the West, a few thoughtful artisans perceived the benefit of judicious combination among workmen plying the same trade. Gradually, no doubt, but unfailingly, the country was covered with societies whose object was to secure a practical monopoly of the respective trades to the members. Rules were of course necessary to the Society thus formed, and as men grew cumulating it became necessary to enforce obedience to the rules. Expulsion of members would be useless without their prosecution, as it would otherwise only foster competition. Compulsory membership would follow naturally, and to enforce it there would necessarily arise a system of tender-handed or openly violent interference with the trade or personal liberty of a non-member. When once it was discovered that power of this kind could be exerted for trading purposes, it was but a natural result that unscrupulous men should conceive the idea of forming the like organisations for political purposes. The various political associations which form so striking an element in Chinese Society are in a great measure analogous in their principles and constitution to the Guilds, which are openly recognised and supported by the Authorities. Secret Societies of all kinds tend in their very nature to become political organisations, and terribly powerful and dangerous ones they may become unless checked by the operation of sound law and a strong Government. In China for many years there have existed all the conditions for the establishment of such organisations in their fullest vigour. The absence of any strong police or other means of maintaining order, and the consequent powerlessness of authority to deal with them, have favoured the despots which they could exercise over their members, and have enabled them to perfect the system of intimidation which they now know too well how to bring to bear upon those who are without their pale. What wonder that these Societies have grown into the worst examples of secret political organisations which the world contains. No wretched man like the dread of lawless violence. Like the secret intriguers in European countries, the members of these Associations are accustomed to swear a terrible oath of fidelity; but the dread of the Association and the knowledge that its power can be wielded without fear of law, is a far more terrible bond of union than the oath. Consequently, individual defection from a guild in China is almost impossible. Unless the whole organisation be broken up the fear of its vengeance will prevent the revelation of its secret. Only by extraordinary means and under extraordinary circumstances do we get an insight into the inner working of these tyrannical institutions. It is only by degrees that we have learned how Chinamen, their ancient civilization notwithstanding, are the most wretched slaves in the world, mental slavery being more degrading than physical slavery, exactly as mental suffering exceeds physical suffering in intensity. But it must not be forgotten that the tyranny exercised by these Associations is at least equalled in importance by the political intriguing which every one of them carries on. The one we may not be able to deal with, since it is to a great extent the affair of the men intimidated. It may also be extremely difficult, perhaps impossible, to cope with the other, but at all events this is pre-eminently the province of Government, and especially of an alien Government like that of Hongkong. If we cannot deal with the question satisfactorily, at all events let us walk open-eyed into the snare which are prepared for us. It is useless to pooh-pooh warnings on this subject. Let any one who feels inclined to do so examine the evidence taken in the inquiry with regard to the Peiping Riots, and he will be fully convinced that these Secret Associations are able to subvert all authority unless means be taken for checking their movements.

Now we do walk into these snare every day, looking at them unconcernedly, and even admiring their exquisite construction. We allow the Chinese—that is, as a matter of course, the Societies—to work for and attain objects which we see in almost all cases perverted in the use. At one time they obtain from us gambling licences, and harbour criminals within the houses so licensed. At another time, when they are threatened with constable inspection, they require us to withdraw the licences. Another idea emanating from the Societies was the brilliant one of night-pases and district watchmen, a convenient arrangement by which the streets are kept empty, favourite burglars who buy the watchmen or the societies may conduct their operations in safety. Thus we are already almost at the mercy of these truly wonderful organisations. It would not, however, be late to exhort for a well-advised and energetic Government to make some head against their machinations. That they do constantly scheme for the reduction of Government into a game of intimidation, here, as on the mainland, is in part a fact that it seems suicidal to close one's eyes to it. On the part of the Government, it is worse than suicidal for their duty is to protect not themselves only, but all who reside in this Colony.

OFFICERS IN THE MERCHANT NAVY

During the recent Court of Enquiry on the loss of the British ship *Argus*, registered in this port, and abandoned and totally lost on her return voyage from Bangkok, it is transpired that she had been penetrated by the Mercantile Marine office to leave Hongkong on a voyage to a place not situated in the possession in which such ship was registered, without carrying on her articles a duly certified second mate. The *Government Gazette* of August 7th, 1869, contained a notice "to masters, mates, brokers, and others interested in Colonial ships, issued in consequence of the ignorance occasionally manifested by Colonial ship-masters of the provisions of 'The Merchant Shipping Act,' which affect Colonial ships engaged in the trade of the United Kingdom," directing attention to the term "the last clause of section 109 of the Merchant Shipping Act, 1864," viz., "The whole of the third part of this Act shall apply to all ships registered in any British Possession, and employed in the trade of the United Kingdom,"—directing attention to the term "any place in the United Kingdom, and any port or place not situated in the possession in which such ships are registered, and to the owners, masters, and crews of such ships respectively, wherever the same may be."

By section 136 (one of the sections contained in the third part of the Act), it is provided as follows:—

"No foreign-going ship or home-trade passenger ship shall go to sea from any port in the United Kingdom unless the master thereof, and in the case of a foreign-going ship the first and second mates or only mate (as the case may be), and in the case of a trade-passenger ship the first or only mate, or in the case of a ship having only one officer, and two or more valid certificates of competency or service appropriate to the several stations in such ship, or of a higher grade; and no such ship, if of one hundred tons burthen or upwards, shall go to sea as aforesaid, unless at least one officer besides the master has obtained and possesses a valid certificate appropriate to the grade of only mate or to a higher grade; and every person who, having been engaged to serve as an officer at first and second mates or only mate of any foreign-going ship, or as master or first or only mate of a home-trade passenger ship, the first or only mate, or in the case of a ship having only one officer, and two or more valid certificates of competency or service appropriate to the several stations in such ship, or of a higher grade; 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